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ANALYZING TOURIST MOTIVATION FOR DESTINATION PROMOTION THROUGH EWOM: FOCUS ON GASTRONOMIC EVENTS

АНАЛИЗА МОТИВАЦИЈЕ ТУРИСТА ЗА ПРОМОЦИЈУ ДЕСТИНАЦИЈЕ ПУТЕМ ЕВОМ-А: ФОКУС НА ГАСТРОНОМСКЕ МАНИФЕСТАЦИЈЕ

***Abstract:** Gastronomy plays a significant role in the cultural experience of everyday life, offering tourists a unique way to explore different aspects of a destination. Culinary experiences often serve as a key factor in the decision-making process when choosing travel destinations. During 2023 and 2024, the authors conducted a study at four major events in rural areas of Serbia: Kulen Festival in Erdevik, Bacon Festival in Kačarevo, Cabbage Festival in Mrčajevci, and Bean Festival in Čenej, surveying a total of 235 visitors. The aim of the research was to analyze the motivation of tourists at gastronomic events with the goal of promoting the destination through eWOM. The results showed that five factors influence tourists at gastronomic events to be motivated to recommend and promote the tourist*

***Анстракт:** Гастрономија има значајну улогу у културном доживљају свакодневног живота, пружајући туристима јединствен начин истраживања различитих аспеката дестинације. Кулинарска искуства често представљају кључни фактор у процесу одлучивања приликом избора туристичких дестинација. Током 2023. и 2024. године, аутори су спровели истраживање на четири значајне манифестације у руралним деловима Србије: Фестивалу кулена у Ердевику, Фестивалу сланине у Качареву, Кунусијади у Мрчајевцима и Пасуљијади у Ченеју, анкетајући укупно 235 посетилаца. Циљ истраживања био је анализа мотивације туриста на гастрономским манифестацијама са циљем промоције дестинације путем електронског усменог преношења (eWOM).*

destination through eWOM. The findings of this study indicate a significant potential for the development of gastronomic tourism in rural tourist destinations in Serbia. The practical implications of this research suggest that organizers of gastronomic events should focus on enhancing the tourist experience in order to encourage more positive eWOM, thereby effectively promoting destinations and attracting a larger number of tourists.

Key words: motivation, rural destination, gastronomic events, eWOM

Introduction

Certain regions worldwide have seen significant growth in gastronomic tourism. To attract more tourists interested in exploring a location through its cuisine, destinations host various gourmet events. Globally, gastronomic tourism plays a key role in developing tourism destinations (Stojanović & Čerović, 2008; Vukolić, 2020). Culinary experiences often motivate travel and shape the visitor experience (Basil & Basil, 2016; Perez-Galvez et al., 2021). Food is increasingly recognized in tourism as part of local culture, tourism promotion, and economic growth (Hall & Mitchell, 2001). Additionally, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has become vital for promoting destinations, as tourists rely on online reviews. Specific traveler types, like chefs, seek new culinary products and techniques, using them as inspiration for their restaurants (Cordova-Buiza et al., 2021). Gastronomy also contributes to the economic progress of destinations, especially in developing countries (Mgonje et al., 2016). Gastronomic tourism effectively promotes destinations, preserving the value of local products (Anderson et al., 2017). Recent studies in Spain, Italy, Ireland, Peru, and Serbia analyze gastronomic tourism's impact

Rezultati su pokazali da pet faktora utiče na turiste koji poseđuju gastronomске манифестације да буду мотивисани да препоруче и промовишу туристичку дестинацију путем eWOM-а. Налази ове студије указују на значајан потенцијал за развој гастрономског туризма у руралним туристичким дестинацијама у Србији. Практичне импликације истраживања сугеришу да организатори гастрономских манифестација треба да се фокусирају на унапређење туристичког доживљаја како би подстакли позитивнији eWOM, чиме би се ефективно промовисале дестинације и привукао већи број туриста.

Кључне речи: мотивација, рурална дестинација, гастрономске манифестације, eWOM

on tourist satisfaction and destination evaluation (Jimenez Beltran et al., 2016; Janqueira et al., 2020; Peira et al., 2018; Cordova-Buiza et al., 2021; Vukolić et al., 2021). Cordova-Buiza et al. (2021) found that tourists motivated by gastronomy are likely to recommend destinations through eWOM. Hjalager (2004) and Pesonen et al. (2011) noted that tourist motivations related to gastronomy vary widely, with culinary expectations influencing destination choice (Basil & Basil, 2016; Lopez-Guzman, 2017). This research at four major gastronomic events examined tourist motivation and their intention to recommend destinations via eWOM. Results show that tourists motivated by the gastronomic offerings are willing to recommend the destinations to others through eWOM.

Literature

Tourist motivation represents a key concept in tourism research as it helps to understand the reasons why people travel, how they choose destinations, and what their expectations are regarding their journeys (Pearce & Lee, 2005; Petrović et al., 2017). Tourist motivation can be defined as a set of psychological and social factors that drive individuals to engage in tourism activities (Yousaf et al., 2018). One of the most in-

fluent theoretical frameworks for understanding tourist motivation is the push-pull factor model. Push factors refer to internal impulses or needs of the individual, such as the need for escape, relaxation, adventure, or education. On the other hand, pull factors are specific characteristics of a destination that attract tourists, such as natural beauty, cultural heritage, or recreational opportunities (Masina et al., 2021; Carvache-Franco et al., 2023).

Socio-psychological theories also provide significant insights into tourist motivation. Research highlights the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in tourist behavior, where intrinsic motivation stems from the satisfaction derived from the activities themselves, while extrinsic motivation arises from rewards that are not directly related to the activities, such as status or recognition (Yoo et al., 2018). It is also suggested that tourists make decisions based on their expectations about how well a particular trip will meet their needs and desires (Pizam & Mansfeld, 1990; Yoo et al., 2018). Cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping tourist motivation. Studies show that cultural context can significantly influence what tourists seek in their travels (Boukas, 2013). For example, tourists from Western countries may be more motivated by adventure and autonomy, while tourists from collectivist cultures may place greater importance on family travel and social interactions (Li & Cai, 2012).

Demographic factors such as age, gender, education, and economic status also have a significant impact on tourist motivation. Similarly, economic status influences whether tourists will seek luxury destinations or destinations with lower costs (Aziz et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2018).

In recent years, research on tourist motivation has increasingly focused on specific types of tourism, such as ecotourism, gastronomic tourism, and cultural tourism (Gracan, 2020; Telbisz et al., 2023). For example, research in the field of gastronomic tourism shows that the motivation to visit destina-

tions may be directly related to the desire to enjoy local cuisine and culinary experiences (Galati et al., 2023; Gajić et al., 2024). Additionally, with the rise of digital technologies, the motivation to travel is increasingly shaped by the influence of social networks and online communities. These platforms allow tourists to research destinations before traveling, receive recommendations from other travelers, and build expectations that influence their final decisions (Aziz & Alam, 2024).

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has become one of the most powerful tools for promoting tourist destinations. eWOM refers to any form of communication or recommendation that users exchange over the internet about products, services, or in this case, destinations (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2023). In the context of tourism, eWOM encompasses reviews, comments, ratings, blogs, and social media, all of which have a significant impact on the perception and decisions of potential tourists. The development of the internet and digital platforms has enabled tourists to share their experiences with a wider audience, resulting in the increased importance of eWOM in travel decision-making (Le & Ryu, 2023). Unlike traditional marketing channels, eWOM is perceived as an authentic and informal form of communication, as it comes from other users rather than brands or official sources. This factor enhances the trust and credibility of eWOM in the eyes of potential tourists (Llamero, 2014; Abubakar et al., 2017).

eWOM can significantly influence the image of a tourist destination. Positive reviews and recommendations can attract new visitors, while negative comments can deter potential tourists (Pantano & Di Pietro, 2013). Additionally, eWOM plays a crucial role in raising awareness of lesser-known destinations, allowing them to compete with larger and more popular tourist centers (Medeková et al., 2023). Research shows that eWOM plays a significant role during the planning stages of a trip and in the decision-making process. Potential tourists often explore online reviews and recommendations

to gather information about destinations they are considering. Based on this information, they make decisions about where to travel, where to stay, and what activities to engage in during their visit (Chen et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2024). eWOM not only affects travel decisions but also influences expectations and experiences during the visit. For instance, tourists who read positive reviews before arriving at a destination may have high expectations, which can affect their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the destination (Stylos et al., 2023).

Gastronomic events represent a significant aspect of tourism and are becoming an increasingly popular motive for travel worldwide. These events, which include food festivals, wine tours, fairs, and other events dedicated to local cuisine and gastronomy, attract tourists interested in authentic experiences that blend culture, tradition, and culinary delights (Carvache-Franco et al., 2023). Gastronomic events not only promote local cuisine but also strengthen the identity of the destination (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017; Gajić et al., 2023). These events provide tourists with the opportunity to experience unique culinary experiences deeply rooted in local culture and tradition. Food festivals often attract not only domestic but also international visitors, contributing to the development of tourism and economic benefits for local communities (O'Sullivan & Jackson, 2002; Vukolić et al., 2023).

Furthermore, gastronomic events play a significant role in fostering loyalty among tourists. Visitors who enjoy these events often return to the destination, contributing to the long-term development of tourism. Gastronomic events also enable destinations to differentiate themselves in the tourism market by attracting specific segments of tourists interested in culinary experiences (López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012). Gastronomic events represent a strong motive for travel, particularly for tourists seeking authentic and unique experiences. These events can significantly influence the perception of the destination, as they provide tourists

with the opportunity to directly experience culture and tradition through food and drink (Stone et al., 2018). Many destinations use gastronomic events as a key component of their marketing strategies, recognizing their potential to attract specific market segments, such as gastronomic tourists (Li & Cai, 2012; Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017; Vukolić et al., 2022).

When the concept of gastronomic events is linked with tourist motivation and eWOM, it becomes clear that these events play a crucial role in promoting destinations through digital channels. Tourist motivation to attend gastronomic events often arises from the desire for authentic cultural experiences, as well as the pursuit of quality and innovative food and beverages (González-Rodríguez et al., 2016). Gastronomic events provide content that is easily shared through eWOM. Visitors to these events often use social media and other online platforms to share their experiences, posting photos, videos, and reviews that can influence the decisions of other potential tourists (Fox & Longart, 2016). Positive eWOM communication about gastronomic events can significantly increase the visibility and attractiveness of a destination, attracting new visitors (Martin et al., 2016).

Methodology

This study aims to analyze tourist motivation and its role in promoting destinations through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The research was conducted in 2022 at four significant gastronomic events in rural parts of Serbia: Kulen Festival in Erdevik, Bacon Festival in Kačarevo, Cabbage Festival in Mrčajevci, and Bean Festival in Čenej. A total of 295 visitors at these events constituted the sample on which the analysis was based. Data were collected through fieldwork using structured questionnaires, which were pre-tested and adjusted based on a pilot study. The questionnaire was designed based on existing studies in the field of gastronomic tourism and eWOM (Lopez-Guzman et al., 2017; Cordova-Buiza et al., 2021), and

it contains three main segments: socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, characteristics of their travels, and their motivations and interests related to gastronomy.

The survey was conducted at different times during the events to ensure the representativeness of the sample and to capture a broad spectrum of visitors. The questions included various formats—from closed to open-ended questions, with the use of a Likert scale with 5 points (1 = completely unimportant; 5 = very important) to quantify relevant items for the research. The collected data were analyzed to identify key factors influencing tourist motivation, as well as their willingness to recommend the visited destinations through eWOM. This analysis pro-

vides a deeper understanding of the role of gastronomic events in creating a positive destination image and encouraging further promotion through eWOM (González-Rodríguez et al., 2016).

Results

In the study conducted at four significant gastronomic events in rural parts of Serbia, a total of 235 respondents participated. The demographic characteristics of the participants, including gender, age, education level, and income, are presented in Table 1. These data provide insight into the various socio-demographic profiles of the respondents, contributing to a better understanding of the sample structure in this research.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Characteristic	Category	N (%)
Gender	male	133 (56.6%)
	female	102 (43.4%)
Age	18-30	79 (33.62%)
	31-60	100 (42.55%)
	61+	56 (23.83%)
Education	high school	95 (40.43%)
	college or university degree	91 (38.72%)
	master or PhD	49 (20.85%)
Salary	low average salary	25 (9.33%)
	medium average salary	117 (43.66%)
	high average salary	94 (35.07%)
	extremely high average salary	32 (11.94%)

Source: Author's research

Cronbach's alpha is a measure of internal consistency, that is, how closely related a set of items are as a group. It is considered to be a measure of scale reliability. Reliability statistics are most often used when there are several questions in the questionnaire that are assessed by the Likert scale. This reliability is investigated by Cronbach's Alpha test which must be greater than 0.07. In the case of this research, the value of this test is 0.824, which indicates the high reliability of the questionnaire.

Through the conducted factor analysis (Table 2), five key factors were identified that explain the motivation of tourists to participate in gastronomic events and their willingness to promote destinations through electronic word of mouth (eWOM). These factors are defined based on the obtained mean values (M) and standard deviations (SD), which are presented below. The first factor, Motivation for Participation in Gastronomic Events (M = 3.55, SD = 0.688), encompasses the motives of visitors to attend events that promote local

gastronomy. The mean value indicates that visitors are generally motivated to participate in such events, while the relatively small standard deviation suggests homogeneity in responses. This indicates that the majority of visitors share similar motives regarding the exploration and discovery of local culinary specialties. The second factor, Perception of the Destination ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.762$), relates to how visitors perceive the destination through gastronomic events. The mean value shows a moderately positive attitude of visitors toward the impact of these events on the perception of the destination, while the standard deviation suggests slight variability in responses, indicating the existence of different perceptions among respondents. The third factor, Social Interaction and Experien-

ce ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.755$), describes the importance of social interaction and the overall experience during gastronomic events. The high mean value indicates the significance that visitors place on social aspects and the experience at events, while the moderate standard deviation suggests consistency in visitors' experiences and expectations regarding social interaction. The fourth factor, eWOM ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.826$), refers to the tendency of visitors to share their experiences from events through digital platforms such as social networks and blogs. The mean value indicates a moderate willingness of visitors to engage in eWOM activities, while the somewhat higher standard deviation points to variations in respondents' attitudes toward sharing their experiences online.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Factors and Statements in the Analysis of Tourist Motivation at Gastronomic Events

Factor	m*	SD*		m*	SD*
Motivation to participate in gastronomic events	3.55	0.688	It is important to me to attend events that promote local gastronomy.	3.59	0.698
			My visit to the event is motivated by the desire to try specialties that I cannot find elsewhere.	3.09	0.851
			Participating in culinary workshops and competitions inspires me.	3.88	0.664
			I am attracted by the authenticity of local food and drinks at these events.	3.49	0.964
Perception of the destination	3.22	0.762	Visiting these events contributes to my perception of the destination as an attractive tourist spot.	4.05	0.761
			Gastronomic events are the reason why I would visit this destination again.	3.95	0.673
			I believe that events of this type enhance the image of the destination.	3.55	0.813
			I associate the cultural and historical characteristics of the destination with the gastronomic events.	4.50	0.739
Social interaction and experience	3.82	0.755	It is important to me to meet new people with similar interests at these events.	3.40	0.710
			I appreciate the opportunity to participate in social activities during the event.	3.55	0.677
			My expectations were met in terms of entertainment and recreation during the event.	2.99	0.560
			It is important to me that my friends or family are part of my experience at these events.	4.15	0.750
eWOM	3.55	0.826	I am inclined to share my experience of these events through social media or blogs.	3.60	0.671
			It is important to me to read reviews or recommendations before attending an event.	3.05	0.854
			I would often recommend attending these events online.	3.19	0.866
Satisfaction and intention to revisit	3.72	0.688	I am satisfied with the overall experience at the gastronomic events.	3.05	0.846
			My expectations were met during my visit to the event.	4.13	0.790
			I believe that my positive recommendation can influence others' decision to attend the event.	3.64	0.813
			These events have contributed to my decision to visit this destination again.	3.72	0.841

*M=mean; SD= standard deviation

Source: Author's research

Finally, the fifth factor, Satisfaction and Intention to Revisit ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.688$), relates to the level of visitor satisfaction and their willingness to revisit the event or destination. The mean value indicates general visitor satisfaction, while the low standard deviation suggests that the responses are quite consistent, indicating a high rate of satisfaction and potential for visitor return. In summary, these identified factors - motivation for participation, perception of the destination, social interaction and experience, eWOM, and satisfaction and intention to revisit - provide valuable insights into the key drivers of tourist behavior at gastronomic events. Understanding these factors is crucial for event organizers and destination marke-

ters aiming to enhance tourist experiences, encourage positive eWOM, and ultimately promote the destination to attract a larger number of visitors.

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances indicated statistically significant differences in responses between males and females at the 95% confidence level. An independent samples T-test was used to compare the arithmetic means of responses between male and female respondents. The analysis of the results revealed that there are statistically significant differences in respondents' answers based on gender for all factors, with a significance level of $p < 0.001$.

The results of the t-test are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *T - test (by gender)*

Factor	M*		t*	p*
	Male	Female		
Motivation to participate in gastronomic events	3,13	4,51	-11,423	0,000
Perception of the destination	2,05	3,64	-12,745	0,000
Social interaction and experience	3,71	4,11	-12,244	0,000
eWOM	2,27	3,31	-13,493	0,000
Satisfaction and intention to revisit	3,35	3,90	-12,553	0,000

*m = mean; t = t-test; $p < 0,01$

Source: *Author's research*

The table 3 presents the results of the independent samples t-test, which was conducted to examine the difference in mean values between male and female respondents in relation to several key factors associated with gastronomic events. The first factor, "Motivation to participate in gastronomic events," shows a statistically significant difference between male ($M=3.13$) and female respondents ($M=4.51$), with a t-value of -11.423 and $p < 0.001$, indicating that women have a higher motivation to participate in such events. The second factor, "Perception of the destination," also records a statistically significant difference, where women ($M=3.64$) have a more positive perception of the desti-

nation compared to men ($M=2.05$), as confirmed by the t-test ($t=-12.745$, $p < 0.001$). The third factor, "Social interaction and experience," shows a significantly higher value among female respondents ($M=4.11$) compared to males ($M=3.71$), with $t=-12.244$ and $p < 0.001$, suggesting that women value the social aspects and experiences during events more. The fourth factor, "eWOM," indicates a significant difference between male ($M=2.27$) and female respondents ($M=3.31$), with $t=-13.493$ and $p < 0.001$, meaning that women are more inclined to electronically recommend destinations and events. The final factor, "Satisfaction and intention to revisit," shows that women ($M=3.90$) express

a higher level of satisfaction and a greater likelihood of revisiting the destination compared to men ($M=3.35$), with a statistically significant difference ($t=-12.553$, $p<0.001$).

The relationship between subjectively experienced satisfaction and the level of education of the respondents was investigated using Pearson's linear correlation coefficient. For Pearson's correlation, an absolute value of 1 indicates a perfect linear rela-

tionship, while a value close to 0 indicates no linear relationship between the variables. The sign of the coefficient indicates the direction of the relationship. After the analysis, the results confirmed that the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homogeneity of variance were satisfied. A strong positive correlation between these two variables was calculated, $r = 0.8$, $n = 295$, $p < 0.001$, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlations

		Satisfaction	Education
Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	1	.8
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	235	295
Education	Pearson Correlation	.8	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	235	295

Source: Author's research

Discussion

In this study, which examined the relationship between subjectively experienced satisfaction and the level of education of the respondents, the results indicate a significant positive correlation between these two variables. The Pearson correlation results ($r = 0.8$, $p < 0.001$) suggest a strong linear relationship between the level of education and subjective satisfaction, meaning that respondents with higher education levels tend to report higher levels of subjective satisfaction. These results can be interpreted in the context of several factors. First, higher education may contribute to a greater level of critical thinking, awareness, and the ability to recognize quality services or experiences, which can influence subjective satisfaction. Additionally, educated individuals may be in a better economic position, allowing them access to higher-quality experiences, further enhancing their satisfaction levels.

However, while the correlation is strong, it is important to consider that correlation does not imply causation. Other factors may also influence this relationship, such as per-

sonal preferences, cultural context, and other socio-demographic factors that were not covered in this study. Furthermore, although the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homogeneity of variance were satisfied, it is important to note that these analyses only provide insight into the linear relationships between variables. Non-linear relationships, as well as potential interactions between variables, were not examined in this study, and future research could further explore these aspects.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant role of various factors in shaping tourist behavior and perceptions at gastronomic events. The results indicate that tourists, particularly women, show a strong motivation to participate in such events, driven by factors such as the unique culinary experiences offered, the social interactions and cultural richness associated with these destinations, and the overall satisfaction with the events.

Moreover, the findings emphasize that tourists are not only satisfied with their

experiences but are also highly motivated to share their positive impressions and recommend these gastronomic destinations through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). This tendency to promote destinations via digital platforms suggests that eWOM is a powerful tool in the marketing and promotion of gastronomic tourism, contributing to the growing popularity and attractiveness of these destinations. This insight is particularly valuable for event organizers and destination marketers, as it underscores the importance of enhancing the overall tourist experience to foster positive eWOM and, consequently, attract more visitors in the future.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to understanding tourist motivation and perception in the context of gastronomic events, with a particular focus on the role of eWOM in destination promotion. Theoretically, the study confirms the importance of socio-cultural factors, such as social interaction and cultural authenticity, as key determinants of tourist satisfaction and their willingness to share experiences through eWOM. The findings of this research complement existing theoretical frameworks on the impact of gastronomic tourism on destination perception, emphasizing the significance of subjective experiences in forming a positive destination image.

Additionally, the study reveals how various factors, including participation motivation, destination perception, and satisfaction, influence tourists' willingness to use eWOM as a promotional tool. These findings expand the existing literature on eWOM in the context of gastronomic tourism and highlight the importance of further research into the role of digital platforms in shaping tourist behavior and promoting destinations.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are significant for organizers of gastronomic events and tourism destination marketers. The results indicate that careful planning and enhancement of gastronomic events are cru-

cial for attracting tourists, particularly those motivated by authentic experiences and cultural diversity. Organizers should focus on creating unique and interactive experiences that will increase visitor satisfaction, leading to a higher likelihood that tourists will share their positive impressions through eWOM.

Furthermore, given that eWOM plays a key role in destination promotion, tourism organizations and marketers should implement strategies that encourage digital sharing of experiences, such as contests, social media promotions, and active engagement with visitors on digital platforms. These strategies not only increase the visibility of the destination but also help in building a loyal visitor base that will continuously promote the destination through positive recommendations.

Therefore, this study provides valuable guidelines for improving marketing strategies and designing gastronomic events to enhance tourist satisfaction and strengthen destination promotion through eWOM.

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